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Memory and the South

Edward L. Ayers
University of Richmond, eayers@richmond.edu

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I would like to admit right off the bat that I didn't have a thing to do with organizing this extremely well-organized conference, though I did consult on the T-shirts and mugs. I was therefore flattered when the people behind this enterprise asked me to say a few words about memory in general. The Dome Room is a good place for that, since it is testimony to the power of self-consciously shaped memory. The Rotunda and Monticello, idealized memories of a distant classical past, incongruously and somewhat improbably set down in the middle of a rustic slave state, are now what many people think of when they think of Virginia or Charlottesville.

The more I looked into this memory business, the more I realized that this conference, and southern history in general, are parts of an international rethinking of the meaning of memory. The late–twentieth century brings many people to talk about memory in new ways, and there are several reasons for that. Some of those reasons have to do with the historical profession and intellectual life in general, while some of them are located in the world outside.

Our sudden interest in memory has something to do with the democratization of history, with our interest in how literally everyone saw themselves. Our interest in memory is part of our interest in the quotidian, the personal, the local, the concrete. It has something to do too with our loss of faith in the coherence and objectivity of professional history. We can see now that many memories—not merely a few myths and symbols—competed for people's allegiance. Memory, unlike older conceptions of "national character" or "American culture," tends to divide as much as unify.

Our interest in memory has something to do with historians' almost reflexive celebration of oppositional cultures and contestation in general. It has something to do with the heightened level of self-consciousness historians and other intellectuals have about our enterprise, its language, and its assumptions. We are making room for the ineffable, the emotional, the transitory, the incoherent in our accounts of social life—and memory encompasses all of those things.

People think and talk more about memory too because of the increasing politicization of the past by people throughout the world. In fact, the first thing

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we have to recognize about social memory is that it is inherently political; it is about defining us against them—whether the "us" is the nation-state, ethnic group, geographic population, family, or organization—any group with a recognizable past to which it can lay claim. Every group must tell a story to itself about itself, who it is and why it came to be, what memories it cherishes, why it deserves to be taken seriously and respected. Memory is more politically charged than almost anything historians can talk about right now. The things that make people angry today are more about culture than they are about the traditional divisions between left and right or rich and poor; memory makes the cultural political, the political cultural; memory makes present conflicts revolve around questions about the past.

As a result of this fundamentally political impulse underlying memory, we should not be surprised to see it resurfacing at a time in world history when nationalism seems to be reasserting itself along new lines. We should not be surprised to see it at a time when people are killing one another over questions of ethnic purity, when "homelands" are being created and destroyed. We should not be surprised to see it at a time when multiculturalism is a hot topic in the United States. The battle over multiculturalism shows, on one side, people trying to set themselves apart with a "heritage" or "culture," with an identity deriving its authenticity from the past, from something remembered by the group. On the other side, people who see themselves as the cultural guardians of the nation strive to impose an American national identity through "cultural literacy," thinking that we would be unified if we could only remember some commonality in our collective past. People on both sides seem to have lost faith in a self-conscious civic culture that can overcome differences born of the past; as a result, people tend to reify the past, to turn it into property that someone owns or doesn't own. The resurgence of memory is not necessarily a good thing.

The discussion of memory opens up other problematic issues. Is there such a thing as vicarious remembering? What right, if any, can people who are not of the group claim in the process of recovering memory? Should anxiety about "inauthenticity" make us suspect the entire enterprise of memory? Professional historians pride ourselves on facing the past squarely, on expunging the past's terrors by

exposing them to the light of our own understanding. Need we worry about balancing our professional goals and the perceived needs of the groups we study?

The language of southern memory is as problematic as any, hot to the touch. The recurring determination by people in the South to rename themselves has been a story of memory. In the early twentieth century, the polite language with which to refer to descendents of southern slaves was "colored" people, a self-conscious understatement intended to ameliorate the harshness of "black." "Negro" served the same function. Later, though, spokesmen proudly accentuated the distance between their group and others by calling themselves "black." Lately, prominent leaders have called attention to a more complex history and memory with "African American," an announcement that they need not renounce one identity to have the other, or "people of color," an announcement of solidarity with other minorities. All this is a complicated and touchy business.

White southerners face their own problems. For generations self-consciously southern white people enjoyed easy victories in what one historian of memory has called the "competition for enshrining grievances." From *Birth of a Nation* to *Gone with the Wind*, white northerners expressed, in ways both concrete and symbolic, their sympathy with white southerners who draped themselves with battle flags and statuary, with monuments to their ancestors' nobility. But now, with the symbols of white supremacy discredited by the civil rights movement, white southerners get no sympathy or respect on the important territory of national memory; the memorialized white South has been denied any sense of victimization. Its symbols and claims seem ludicrous, hollow, and dishonest; its problems seem the direct result of its own arrogance and mistakes. In perhaps the ultimate testimony to the loss of legitimacy, it is considered permissible among almost any group to make jokes and generalizations about white southerners that would be considered offensive when made about any other group. At a time when ethnic identity has become centered on the memory of inherited suffering and overcoming it, white southerners, as white southerners, find themselves in trouble.

White southern apologists recognize this and appeal to the same language and rationale as other aggrieved ethnic groups. People in Georgia who defend the state flag, with its display of the symbol of the Confederacy, defend it in terms of memory and victimhood: "A kind of inquisition is being waged against southerners," a pamphlet from the Northeast Georgians for the Flag and Southern Heritage warns, "a psychological persecution that would have us renounce our forebears, our heritage, and our culture." Such white southerners think they have lost what other minority groups have only recently gained: historical respectability. In truth, more than a few whites outside the South still give rebel soldiers credit for bravery, and more than a few still idealize the plantation world of Scarlett and

Rhett, but even these southern sympathizers tend to split off private heroism and romance from a discredited identification with slavery and the Confederacy.

The Official South lost historical respectability by being on the wrong side of history, on the side of locality, of slavery, and of a literal-minded adherence to the past. Recalcitrant white southerners trotted out their old symbols in the 1950s and 1960s, and no one outside the South saluted. The symbols seemed pathetic, as dead as the defunct nation-state they represented. Since that time much southern remembrance has come to focus on "culture" rather than on the Confederacy, celebrating the South as Walton's Mountain and Mayberry, as country music and barbecue. Elvis Presley embodies this cultural impulse; he is attractive partly because he seems so apolitical and partly because he reassuringly combines black and white, religious and secular, rebellious and domesticated. The replacement of symbols of division by symbols of reconciliation would seem progress of a sort, though symbols drawn from popular culture tend easily toward caricature and trivialization. A more overtly political memory could easily rise to the surface as the culture wars heat up, perhaps in the form of an evangelical revolt with a distinctly southern accent.

Black southerners now provide the most potent political symbols produced by the South and claimed by the nation. Students reading the latest textbooks are likely to learn as much about Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman as they do about Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis. Movies such as *Glory* put black aspiration and contribution at the heart of the Civil War, while influential television productions such as *Eyes on the Prize* claim the black freedom struggle as the heart of recent history. Above all, Martin Luther King Jr. has, apparently by mutual agreement among races and regions, come to embody America's struggle with the worst part of its past, a Christ figure who died for our sins. The civil rights movement is the place where the most active memorialization is going on these days, where the nation's sense of itself is being formed, where the South plays the largest role in American memory.

The exciting papers published here range across this long history and vast geography of southern memory, posting flags that will help us map varied and somewhat treacherous terrain. Historians may be the greatest beneficiaries of the South's near obsession with telling stories about itself; we have been given rich materials to work with. So I'd like to say welcome to this symposium—and thanks for the memories.